

JOEL SHAPIRO



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Rice Gallery

2 FEBRUARY – 18 MARCH 2012

JOEL SHAPIRO
UNTITLED

Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



FOREWORD

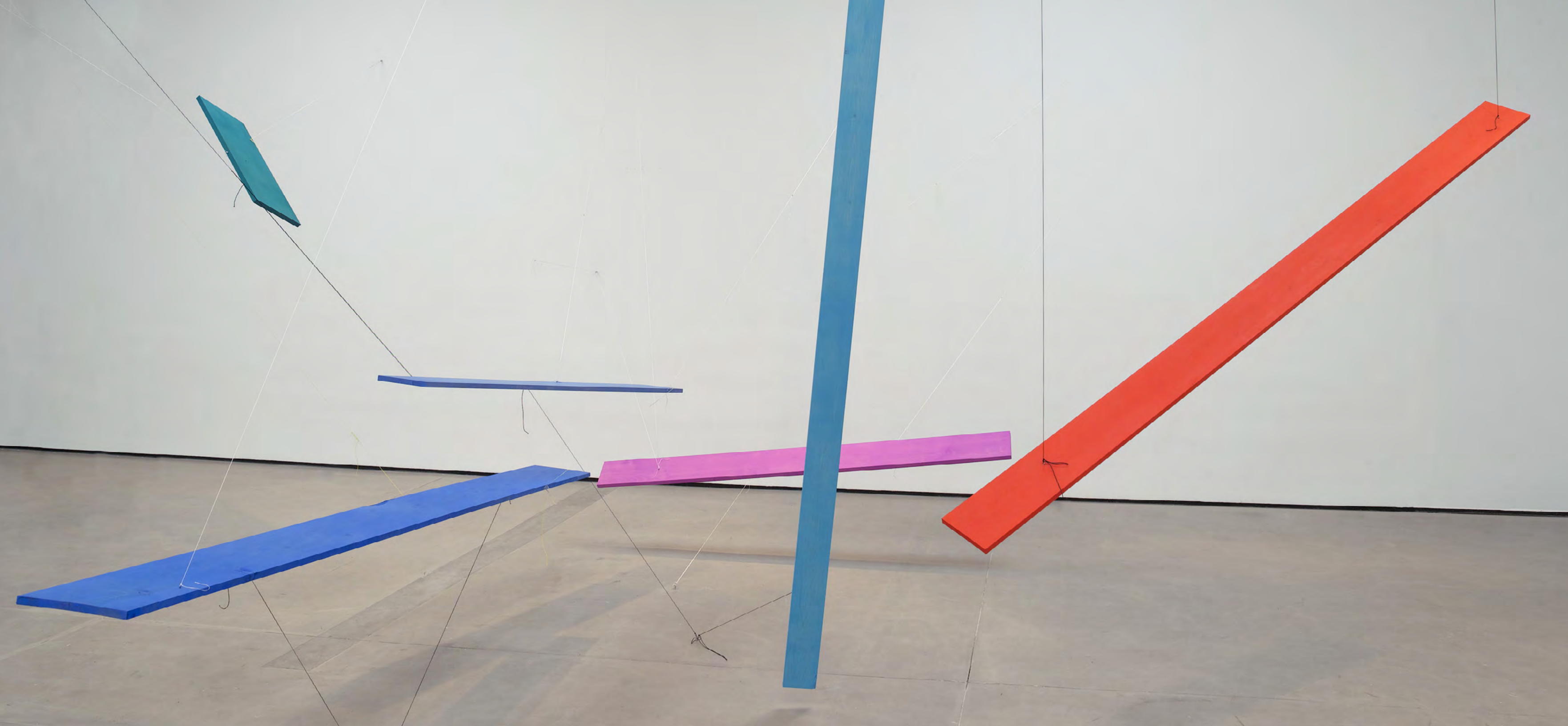
A renowned artist who has been making work since the late 1960s, Joel Shapiro is well known for his geometric, abstract sculptures that appear to bound across museum walls, floors, and sculpture gardens. In these sculptures that often allude to the human figure, Shapiro combines rectangular forms in order to play with the internal and external relationships that define a sculpture. Having seen these works in museum collections throughout the world, I can identify them on sight. In spring 2010, however, I walked into The Pace Gallery on 25th Street in New York and was confronted with sculptures unlike any that I had ever seen by Shapiro: suspended works that looked as if they had been made for the gallery's enormous, bright white space. Unlike a mobile, the sculptural elements – wooden boards of different lengths and widths painted with deep, saturated colors – did not move, but instead were supported and held in tension by black string tied to the floor and stretching upward to fixed points on the ceiling. The strings' dark color and the excess length that had been left wherever it had been tied and cut showed that illusion was not the point. Yet it was impossible to ignore that these rigorously composed sculptures conversely felt completely spontaneous, as they appeared to float in mid-air.

I visited Joel Shapiro in his studio and he explained that since 2002 he has dealt with the idea of form collapsing, free from structure, in a series of sculptures in which he uses string or wire to suspend seemingly loose arrangements of painted and unpainted wood. He has slowly refined and pulled apart these wood clusters to move into his approach to large-scale suspended sculptures that he describes as “the projection of thought into space without the constraint of architecture.” I asked if he would create a new sculpture (he does not like the term “installation”) for Rice Gallery. He agreed, soon traveled to Houston for a site visit, and began creating the site-specific sculpture, *Untitled*, the work he later would consider his best to date.

Untitled, was the product of Shapiro's lifetime of experience as a sculptor, months of careful planning, and ultimately, intuitive decisions: the size, shape, and thickness of the individual planks of spruce wood; the color and density of paint; the relative angle and distance apart to suspend each form in relation to one another and the gallery space, and the number of strings and required tension to hold them in place. To determine these complex relationships, Shapiro worked in his New York studio, moving between a scale model of Rice Gallery and a full-



Joel Shapiro, *Untitled*, 1990
bronze, edition 4/4
89" x 76 1/2" x 27" (226.1 x 194.3 x 68.6 cm)
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Gift of Max and Isabell Smith Herzstein
in memory of Benjamin K. Smith, 90.487



Joel Shapiro, *Was Blue*, 2010
wood, casein, and fishing line
16' 9" x 23' 9" x 41' 10" (510.5 cm x 723.9 cm x 1275.1 cm)
installation dimensions variable

scale mock-up, sensing the beginning, he said, of a sculpture about the dispersal of a human figure, its movement into an unbounded state, "not ripped apart, but animate, expanding."

Untitled's elements were organized around a diagonally situated rectangular block that lent a sense of weight and gravity and stood out for its unusual color, "Paris Blue," a pigment that shifts from a deep blue to purple as it absorbs light differently. Shapiro avoided using color that looked too "canned," instead choosing uncommon tones. A narrow board was painted "Lamp Black," a large rectangle "Urbino Red," and a long plank "Cobalt Violet," to name a few. When *Untitled* was completed, it was surprising to experience the unexpected physicality of the colors, and how each color affected one's perception of each form and the sculpture as a whole. The entire volume of the room became a sculpture the appearance of which constantly changed, renewed from every vantage point.

For discussing the project at an early stage I thank Alison de Lima Greene, Curator of Contemporary Art and Special Projects at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). Thanks also go to Fredericka Hunter, owner of Texas Gallery, and to the Gallery's director Ian Glennie,

both of whom have championed Shapiro's work for many years and organized a concurrent exhibition, *New Sculptures and Drawings*. I appreciate the insights shared by Douglas Baxter, President of The Pace Gallery, New York, as well as the work of Margaret Mims, the MFAH's Public Programs Manager, who organized Joel's lecture in the Museum's Brown Auditorium. Special thanks to arts patrons Mr. and Mrs. I. H. Kempner (Sissy and Denny) who hosted the after-opening dinner for Joel and his wife, artist Ellen Phelan in their beautiful home.

I am extremely grateful to Richard Shiff, Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art and Director of the Center for the Study of Modernism at The University of Texas at Austin for *In the Air*, the insightful and poetic essay he contributed to this catalogue.

Most of all I thank Joel Shapiro. From the day he arrived Joel charmed us all with his humor and wit. He is wonderfully learned, discerning, and outspoken. His art is even more eloquent, and it was a privilege to present it to the Rice and Houston communities.

Kimberly Davenport
Director





IN THE AIR

Classifying current practices of visual art may not reward the intellectual effort. Artists now combine objects and imagery associated with various mediums, including what we call the “media” – the mass culture of publications, broadcasts, and the internet. Contemporary installations are often hybrids, constructed of so many modes of information that identifying a particular medium seems pointless. Better to abandon classification altogether, since artistic invention has never been limited by preexisting concepts and categorical distinctions. As with the history of human society and its unpredictable turns, we conceive the rules for art after the fact. The rules can wait until the events they pretend to arrange actually happen. Joel Shapiro cares little about definitions and rules and simply refers to his practice by the time-tested term *sculpture*. But far more happens in his art than this designation connotes.

Perhaps we continue to care about identifying a medium and its rules because we sense how deeply the principles of the old art academies still affect our culture of images. We show respect for the illusions that traditional representational paintings generate, as if the painting medium were providing historical preparation for our contemporary world of digital, electronic simulation. Painting is dematerialized

simulation before the fact, despite its painterly materiality. By comparison, the practice of sculpture may seem restricted to a truly inescapable materiality – its solidity and the actual volume of space it occupies. The academies established different modes of visualization to correspond with different qualities of spatial extension, whether illusory or real. We still acknowledge these qualities when we refer to *dimension*. Drawing, painting, and photography are conventional modes of rendering that extend in two dimensions – pictures to be developed as flat, planar surfaces. Perspective depth in a flat rendering amounts to an illusion of a third dimension, a fictive increase in the number of dimensions.

Not all illusion is illusion of the same nature and not every instance of flatness is flat to the same degree. Some planar surfaces may be more “sculptural” than others while hardly sculpture. Materially, drawing tends to be flatter than painting, which is likely to have appreciable texture. The nature of photographic printing, whether with the early emulsions or the newer inks, ensures that photographs are flatter still. Electronic imaging on a monitor eliminates even the emulsion and the ink. These nuances of flatness and dematerialization were not the concern of the academic systems; their classifications

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wood, casein, and wire
34 1/4" x 13" x 15" (87 x 33 x 38.1 cm)





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remained obvious, like the difference between painting and sculpture. A sculpture in stone or bronze or wood, even if a wall relief, projects full volume into space, like an actual body that can be touched to assess or confirm its visual form. At its most "sculptural," sculpture is sculpture-in-the-round. You can circumambulate a monumental sculpture or one of modest scale that sits on a pedestal. A sculpture has a rear. A painting has no such view.

Paintings, however, have sides, as well as ups and downs. In most instances, a painting, like a photograph, projects its image on a virtual grid. For the sake of making a dimensional distinction, I prefer to think of drawing as a figure that lacks any grid to orient it. Systems of classification do well not to have holes. Let drawing fill the otherwise empty category of one-dimensional art. Drawing in its essence has no rear, no sides, no up, no down. Flatness ceases to be at issue. Think of drawing as a mere line rather than as a plane or an array of tones. Drawing conveys no more than movement, a sense of direction. It operates as a vector, but without an organizing raster or grid to contain it: it points, it tracks, it traces an image. Turn a drawn line upside down if you like – it can still be followed. Drawing is nearly free of the limitations of materials and physical environments. People

sometimes draw by gesturing in the air. We cannot paint or sculpt in the air. Or can we? Shapiro's new installation at Rice University seems to make it equally possible to draw, paint, and sculpt in the air.

It will help to understand Shapiro's accomplishment if we regard our experience of space as a matter of coordinating qualities of one, two, and three dimensions. A drawing is one-dimensional, as opposed to the two-dimensional orientation of painting and the three-dimensional orientation of sculpture. Having no need to make a philosophical point of it, Shapiro is too playful an artist to stick to implicit rules. I can't claim that he thinks in terms of differentiating one, two, and three dimensions as he works. Yet his art is at once drawing, painting, and sculpture – as radical a hybrid as any, but in an unassuming way. Without the theory, he has done what others theorize.

By the rules, sculpture-in-the-round ought to be self-supporting, a physical object resting on a physical ground. Shapiro acts as if he has no awareness of standards or rules for the sculptural medium. He accepts a self-imposed challenge: he will arrange a weighty sculpture so that it floats, or even flies, in the air. With wood, paint, and a number of lengths of high-performance polyester cord, he

will defy gravity. He uses the cord to suspend painted rectilinear solids at various angles within the rectilinear volume of a containing architectural space. Gravity may indeed be defied, but of course remains in force. Shapiro gives the *appearance* of ignoring it, as if his forms could be located wherever he wishes them. And so they can. "I want lively work," he remarks with a smile – to be sure, an understatement. His installation at Rice exploits the traditional categories of art to explode the otherwise quiescent, orthogonal space of the gallery. For those who have visited the exhibition, the rectilinear neutrality of this architectural volume will never feel the same, having been charged by the memory of a set of chromatic diagonals. Shapiro has placed volumetric sculpture in the air, while giving it the perspective illusion of painting and the directional sense of drawing. The play of vectors is so strong that we wonder whether the cords are in place not as suspension cables but as restraints, preventing the prismatic forms from flying loose and escaping the gallery.

Many of Shapiro's previous works – sculptural compositions anchored to a floor or a wall or sometimes suspended from a ceiling – share features with his in-the-air installation. The dynamic effect depends on variation in the angles, colors, and volumes that collectively form the

viewing environment, a destabilized space that changes. It changes because the skewed angles induce an observer to step within the virtual volume encompassed by the disparate elements of the work – and then to keep moving. No single view of Shapiro's diagonals is normative; every view is an anamorphic variant of the previous view and the one to come. The vectors established by the linear cords intersect with the axial vectors of the elongated prisms of painted wood. Both the cords and the prismatic elements have been angled and rotated away from the orthogonal axes of the architectural frame. To compound the effect, the oddly angled intersections of cord and wood are themselves analogous to the peculiar joins that Shapiro establishes in other sculptures, as he connects the various elements of a construction. However well-engineered, Shapiro's connections always seem tenuous.

The stretches of cord – three types in three colors: black, white, silver – are obviously linear. Relative to the sculptural environment in its entirety, at least two of the elements of wood are also linear. Shapiro painted one of these long, thin elements light green and suspended it quite high in the space of the gallery. The other similarly thin diagonal element is painted black. I will call these lengths of



Joel Shapiro, *untitled*, 2005
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17" x 17 1/2" x 10" (43.2 x 44.5 x 25.4 cm)



Joel Shapiro, *untitled*, 2002-2007
bronze
13' 4" x 27' 9 1/2" x 12' 11" (406.4 x 847.1 x 393.7 cm)

wood *boards*, distinguishing them from the more planar elements to be called planks. The most plank-like of all is the dark red element, because of its relative width. Shapiro has painted other elements of this type red-violet, orange, yellow-orange, and a second variant of light green. A third type of wooden element is the *beam*, which occupies a more substantial volume; a beam is relatively massive. There are two in the Rice installation: one has a light pinkish stain, and the other – the most central element of the composition – is a deep, dark blue. (For reasons of engineering and economy, Shapiro designs the beams as hollow constructions.) Apparently, the colors have been chosen intuitively, following no theory, scheme, or prescribed process. For example, among the three types of wooden form, beams have the greatest sense of weight; yet only one of the two beams has been painted a deep, weighty color. The dark blue element suggests heaviness, resistance, and perhaps a sense that it pulls at its cords. By comparison, the pinkish element floats – not only because of its insubstantial color but because Shapiro angled it farther from the floor, posing less of a threat to interfere with a viewer's movement.

Board, plank, and beam correspond to line, plane, and volume: form in one dimension, in two, and in three – drawing, painting, sculpture.

Shapiro draws in the air, paints in the air, sculpts in the air. Dimensions are interchangeable: from certain angles, a plank will look like a board. Other qualities also morph. On the prismatic surfaces of the beams, the color shifts depending on how a particular face catches the light and where the viewer happens to be located in relation to ambient illumination. Given the point of view, the colors also form radically different compositions – even their relative quantities change, as more or less of a particular element appears on the viewer's scan (a side view holds more color than an end view). And so with respect to the linear vectors: they may seem to be ascending or descending, advancing or receding. Each line among Shapiro's lines is many lines; each color is many colors; each volume is many volumes.

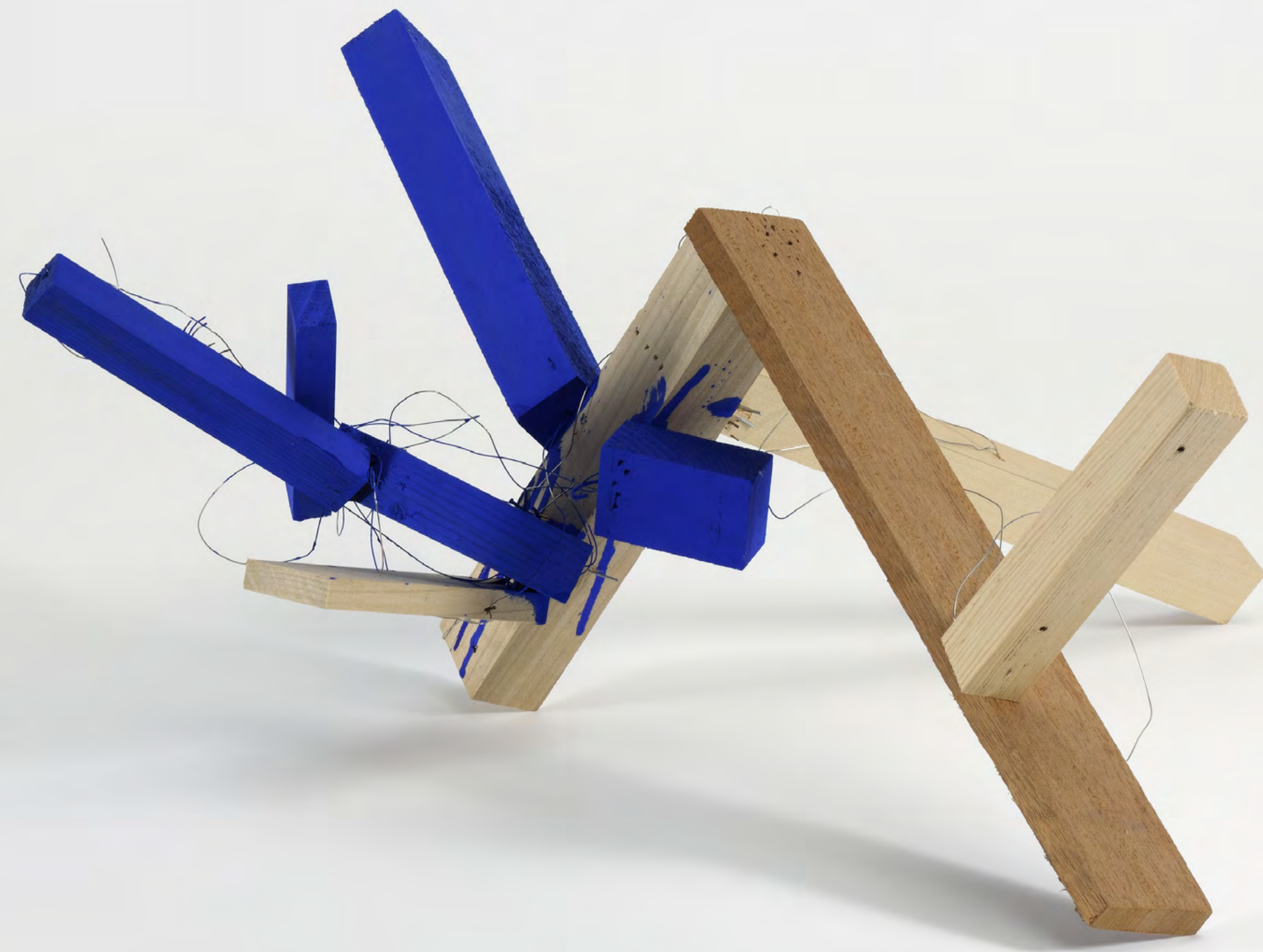
All this has been prefigured in Shapiro's longstanding studio procedure. To develop new forms, he creates sculptural models from studio scraps, pieces of wood small enough to be held in the hand while being fastened together. I suspect that he is sometimes surprised and inspired by an odd form at small scale and immediately imagines its possibilities for sculpting a spatial environment at a scale great enough to influence a viewer's movement. When Shapiro develops models, he uses wire, cord, glue, and a pin gun as devices

for attachment; these methods facilitate the rapid, spontaneous process of seeking and testing various relationships. The attachments are easily undone. Shapiro's permanently constructed objects at full scale often look as if they could just as easily be disassembled; the joins are so eccentric and precarious in appearance that they seem to slip away from their surfaces of contact. In this respect especially, Shapiro's previous works predict his installation at Rice – an exploded reenactment of a single object of nine colored elements, as if joined together at some previous moment of their existence. Gravity does not pull the elements apart; rather, the action seems to derive from energy within the forms themselves, given the dynamism of their vectors.

When Shapiro works with a model, holding it in his hand, gravity is hardly a factor. His creative imagination has bested it. A turn of his hand reorients a form – up, down, sideways – all is possible. A small model in the hand becomes a large sculpture in the air, like the Rice installation. In the space of the gallery, a viewer's movements, active and reactive, substitute for the artist's hand. Such movements replay the hand's turns – in the air.

Richard Shiff
Effie Marie Cain Regents Chair in Art
Director of the Center for the Study of Modernism
University of Texas at Austin

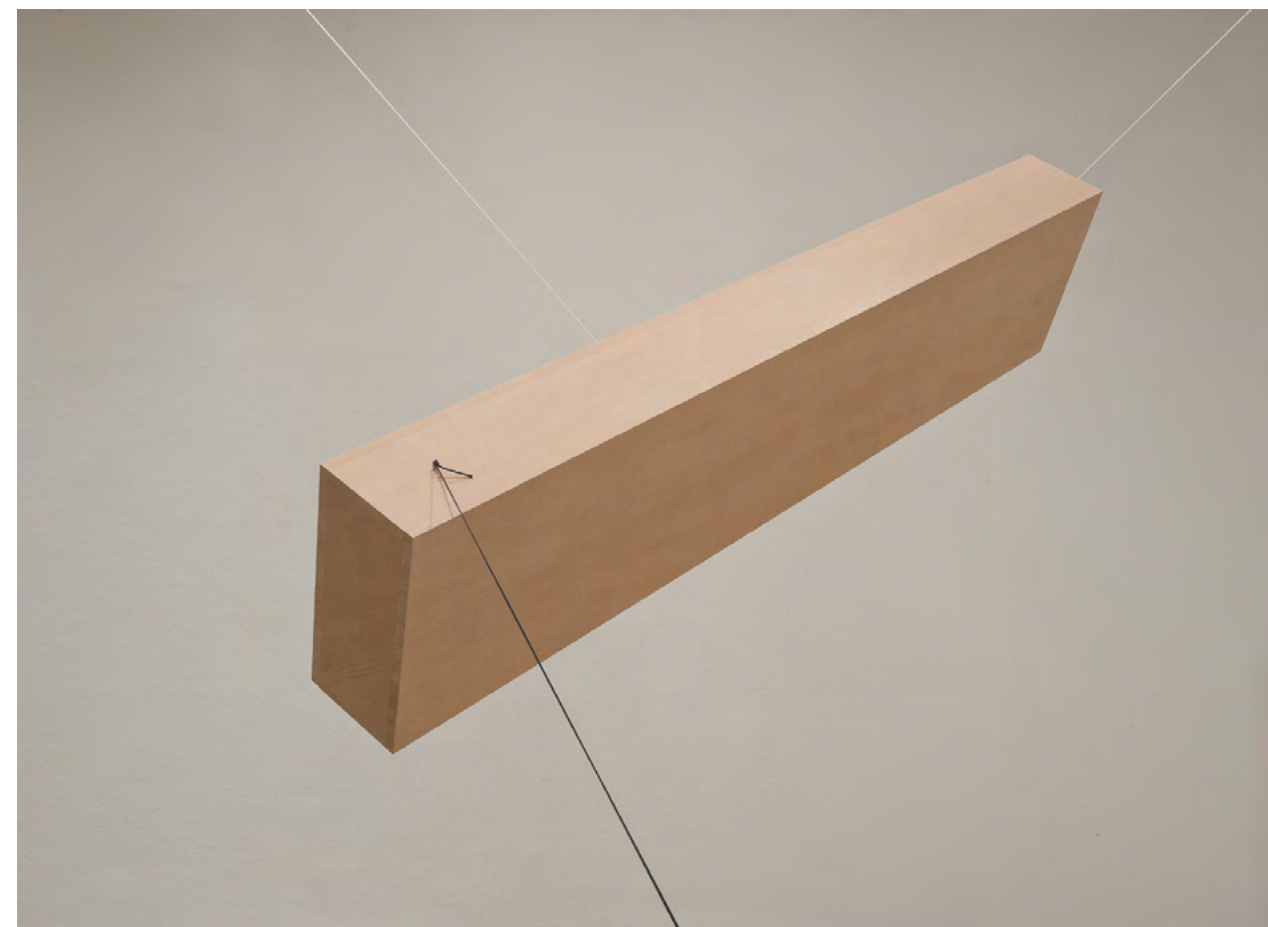
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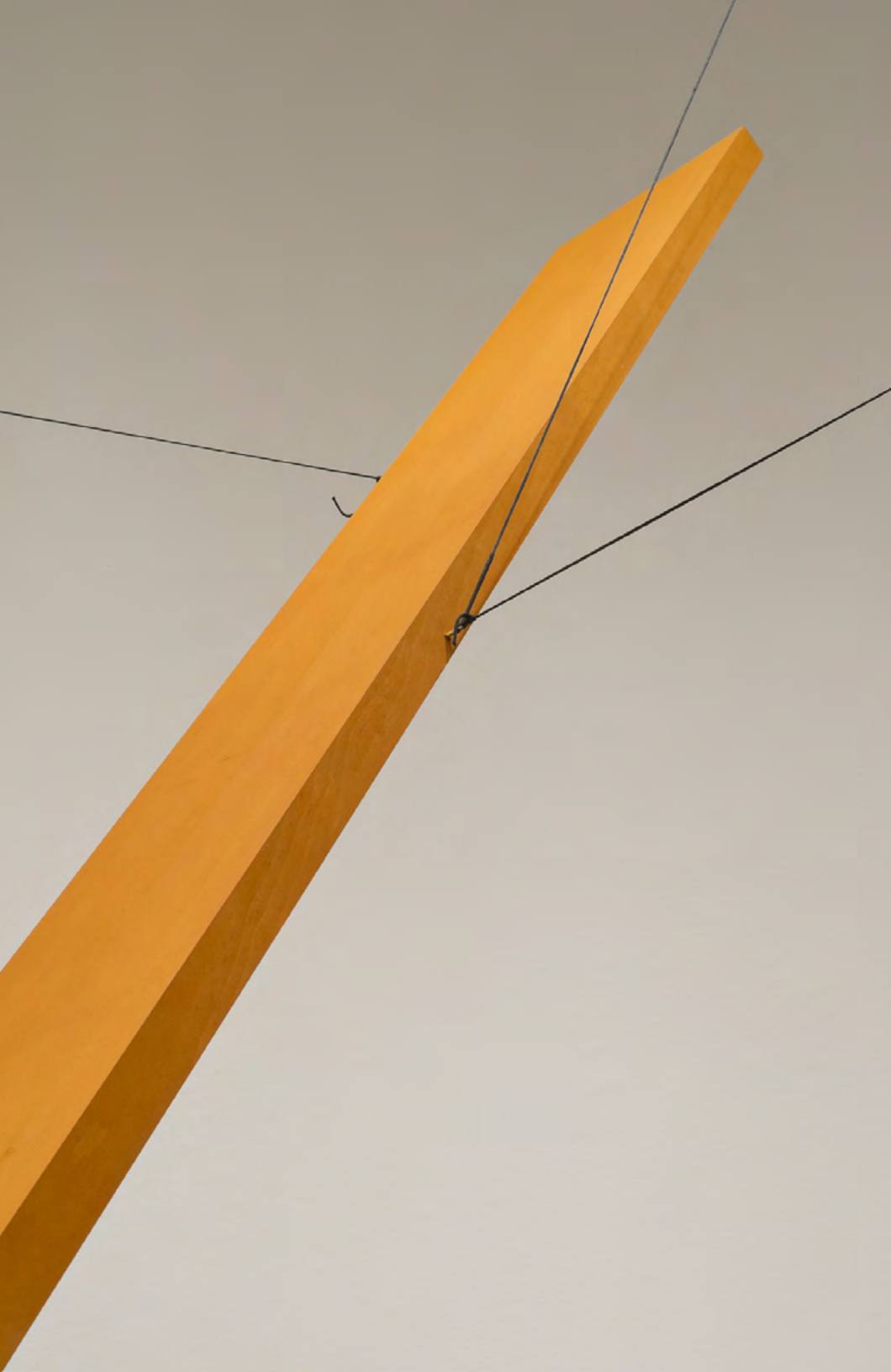














ABOUT THE ARTIST

Joel Shapiro was born in New York City in 1941, and received his BA and MA degrees from New York University. Since his first exhibition in 1970, his work has been the subject of many one-person shows and retrospectives, notably at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1980; Whitney Museum, New York, 1982; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1985; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, jointly with the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, 1995-1996; American Academy in Rome, 1999; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 1999; and The Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2001. In 2005, his sculpture *20 Elements* was installed in the Musée d'Orsay for its contemporary arts initiative *Correspondences*. Shapiro's work can be found in numerous public collections in the United States and abroad, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; the Tate Gallery, London; and the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Prominent commissions include the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC; *Conjunction* for the United States Embassy in Ottawa, Canada, commissioned by the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE); the Communauté de Communes de l'Agglomération Orléanaise in Orléans, France; *Verge*, for 23 Savile Row, London; and *For Jennifer*,

which was installed at the Denver Art Museum. He will install a commission for FAPE at the Consulate General of the United States in Guangzhou, China in 2013.

In 2010, Shapiro had solo exhibitions of new work at The Pace Gallery, New York, and Galerie Karsten Greve, Cologne; additionally, The Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, organized an exhibition of sculpture from the 1970s. He completed an installation of new sculptural work at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne in 2011, and The John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco held an exhibition of new sculpture and drawings that opened in 2012.

Among other distinctions, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998, and he was awarded the Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture in 2005.

Joel Shapiro lives and works in New York City.





Joel Shapiro, *Untitled*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
2 February – 18 March 2012

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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I would like to thank the Director and Chief Curator, Kimberly Davenport, for her commitment to the project, as well as Assistant Curator, Joshua Fischer and Preparator, David Krueger for their invaluable assistance. Thanks are also due my longtime assistant Ichiro Kato and Jonathan Boyd for their hard work on this project from beginning to end. In addition, I would like to thank Professor Richard Shiff for his insightful and observant essay.
- Joel Shapiro

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Page 6
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bronze, edition 4/4, 89" x 76 1/2" x 27" (226.1 x 194.3 x 68.6 cm)
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© 2011 Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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